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Coordinator:
Yanti, Ph.D.

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THE NATURE AND THE EMERGENCE OF COPULA IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

All languages are in perpetual state of changes, including English. One sort of language change is the emergence and the loss of components of grammar. An example of components of grammar in English is related to predicative construction. It is copula—commonly known as “to be” (is, am, are, was, were, been)—which is involved in forming predicative construction, but not the predicate itself. Basically, the emergence of a component is caused by the loss or the shift of other components, and this also happens to the emergence of copula.

There are numerous previous studies on copula in English. However, those studies mostly focused on their syntactic aspects; for instance the analysis on the structure of copular clauses (identificational, predication, specificational, and equational), and the analysis on it-cleft/pseudocleft construction as the non-canonical constructions with copula. Besides, most of them are carried out by applying synchronic approach. Though it is prominent as the evidence of language change, the in-depth study on the factors triggering the emergence of copula by observing Old English and Middle English is not rarely conducted.

Based on the explanation above, therefore, this paper attempts to figure out the nature of copula in English and propose the factors that trigger the emergence of this linguistic component in English by applying the analysis of diachronic approach.

Keywords: Copula, language change, Old English, diachronic

INTRODUCTION

One of the linguistic constructions is sentence. Verspoor and Sauter (2000:34) defined a sentence as a group of words that starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop in its written form, question mark or exclamation mark. A grammatically complete sentence expresses at least one complete whole event or situation with a subject and predicate. The same case happens to English sentences. Thus, subject and predicate and their order hold crucial role in constructing a grammatical construction.

(1) They study English.

The sentence (2) above shows the common or the canonical English sentence consisting of subject filled by a noun, and a predicate filled by a lexical verb. However, another type of English sentence is commonly produced, as in example (2) below.

(2) The little boy *is* happy.

From the sentence (2), we could split up *The little boy* as the subject and *is happy* as predicate. *Happy* expresses the property being ascribed to the subject, *The little boy*. In simpler words, *The little boy* is being modified by *happy* or *happy* is ascribed to *The little boy*. den Dikken states that *is* in the sentence serves as a relator to mediate the relation between subject and predicate. Meanwhile, Baker proposes that the presence of *is* is needed due to the lack of lexical verb in the predicative construction. English only allows verbs to be attached by inflection (2004:46). Therefore, when there is no lexical verb, functional verb such as *is* is needed to assist the attachment of the inflection. A linguistic element such as *is* in the sentence above—also includes *am, are, was, were*—is called copula.

Copula derived from the Latin word *copula* which means anything to link or unify ‘*apa saja yang menghubungkan atau menyatukan*’ (Kamus Bahasa Latin—Indonesia, 1969:196). According to its name, copula serves as a linker in a clause.

Concerning its main function in English, there are many studies on copula, especially on its structure (copular clauses). However, the use of diachronic approach to analyze copula is rarely undertaken. Therefore, this paper attempts to figure out 1) the nature of copula and 2) the factors that trigger the emergence of copula in English which involves diachronic approach.

THE NATURE OF COPULA IN ENGLISH

Copula can be defined into its nature morphosyntactically and syntactically. Morphosyntactically, it is the component or element that assists attaching the inflection. Baker (2004: 46) proposes that the most obvious difference between verbs and other lexical categories is that in many languages only verbs can be inflected for tenses and related notions, such as aspect and mood. This is clearly true in English, which has *walked*, *walks*, and *walking* but not *catted*, *cats*, *catting*, or *bigged*, *biggs*, *bigging*. This is supposedly why copula is needed in nonverbal predications in English. According to Payne (2011:266), if there is no inflection (in English) there will be no clause. It is because inflection holds crucial part as it determines the category of the clause. It is the highest point in syntactic configuration (Sentence = Inflectional Phrase).

Meanwhile, Poedjosoedarmo (2008) states that tense inflection (tense marker) is still needed in English to fulfil two functions; 1) to give the information of time, and 2) to differentiate the verb from the noun or adjective. Nowadays, it is clear why tense inflection is used when other inflectional elements had faded.

Syntactically, copula is a linker. As stated by Dikken (2006), copula appears to establish syntactic and semantic link between subject and predicate due to its asymmetrical and intersective relation⁴. It can be seen that in some languages they cannot be joined directly and will result in ungrammatical construction, especially in English. The following example attempts to provide a proof.

(3) *She smart.

Meanwhile, the inflection being attached directly to the non-verbal predicate makes the sentence ungrammatical.

(3a) *She smarts

However, the presence of copula—in this case is copula *is*—makes the sentence grammatical.

(3b) She *is* smart.

Hence, copula is prominent to make the sentence grammatical.

Beside seeing copula based on morphosyntactic and syntactic aspect, it is prominent to depict copula by observing its function in predicative construction. Napoli (1989:33) states that copula is a grammatical word and therefore it is not directly involved in the formation of a predicate (predicate remains in the form of non-verbal predicates). It is also in line with the statement of Pustet (2003:5) that the copula is a linguistic unit that appears with certain lexemes when they serve as the predicates. However, copula has no semantic content on the predicate. Meanwhile, verb like *seem* (Napoli, 1989:19) together with non-verbal predicate form a predicate (both syntactic and semantically form predicative construction) but it is not the predicate.

THE EMERGENCE OF COPULA

This paper attempts to propose hypotheses on the emergence of copula in English. This paper is best analyzed by using diachronic approach. It will cover three triggering factors: 1) grammaticalisation, 2) the change of word order, and 3) the characteristic of Indo-European languages.

⁴ read den Dikken (2006) to know further about asymmetrical and intersective relation between subject and predicate.

Grammaticalisation

Language is in the perpetual state of changes. Language change can be defined as the way to economize the language itself. A sort of language change is grammaticalisation, a shift from more lexical meaning to more grammatical content (Campbell, 1998:241). The statement is in line with Heine and Kuteva's definition. Grammaticalisation is defined as the development from lexical to grammatical forms and from grammatical to even more grammatical forms (2004:2).

Grammaticalisation is firmly related to the loss of semantic feature. A linguistic unit is being semantically declined to be "another" linguistic unit. It can be clearly seen from the change of lexical category into functional category. Lexical category is a "richer" category since it has more semantic features. On the other hand, functional category is a "poorer" category. According to *Principle of Feature Economy*, "minimize the semantic/interpretable features in the derivation" (van Gelderen, 2009:216), thus the richer category changes into the poorer one.

Components which often used mean the components are useful or able to meet the needs of speakers of the language. One of the most frequently used components is verb, including in English. Therefore, the verb in the English language automatically becomes the "target" of language change. As described above, the inflection is loss in English, as well as the inflection in verb. In Early Modern English, the verb is very strong as it contains many inflections. Thus, the verbs are called strong verbs (strong verb). These strong verbs are typical verbs in Indo-European languages (Baugh and Cable, 1978:59-61). Strong verbs are the verbs that indicate changes of time by modifying vocal roots (root vowel). Because verbs being grammaticalised (economizing language), inflections in verbs is reduced, leaving only a few. Consequently, the verbs become weaker and they are called weak verbs (Radford, 2003:120-123). Weak verb is a verb that requires the presence of inflections to indicate tense (Baugh and Cable, 1978: 59-61). Therefore, in the Early Modern English, to make interrogative construction, verbs can be put forward without invoking "dummy" *do*. While in the present-day English, it requires the presence of the auxiliary *do* to construct questions or negation sentence. It is the influence of the reduction of verbs density so that they cannot easily be moved (Poedjosodarmo, 2008).

Therefore, it is possible to happen that lexical verb (richer category) is being grammaticalised into copula (poorer category). As exemplified by Lohndal via van Gelderen (2009:229) that there was a full verb (lexical verb) *was* that turned into a copula *was* (which indicate past tense). As a lexical verb, *was* certainly brings a certain semantic features. Because being grammaticalised, these features decrease or even disappear and now it was more to do with the information of time (tense).

The Change of Word Order

English is the language of the OV word order (in the Old English) although some sources such as Trips (2002:1) states that it is essentially the Old English language also has a pattern of VO. The OV structure is more dominant due to the immense use of inflection which indicates the case so the word order (OV or VO) is not too important. Constituents which serve as the subject can be identified from the marker in the end of the word (noun). The dominance of the OV than the VO word order occurred during the Middle English because there are influences from the invasion of Scandinavia to British island. *Old Norse* (Scandinavian) is still allied with the German language and they have VO word order. The change began when the Scandinavian (Old Norse) put stress or pressure in the word (Crystal, 2003:32). The use of stress or pressure causes the use of inflection began to fade.

Nevertheless, Payne (2011:29) argues that the contact occurred in the community of speakers of the languages that caused the inflection slowly fade away. The speakers of West Saxon (Old English) and Old Norse are basically related (the languages are still included as a family). They create a kind of pidgin-like that allows both speakers to communicate. Since there is no inflection, it needs another way to express grammatical relations in the clause or sentence construction, such as subject and object. Therefore, it slowly switched to the VO word order that has the rigid word order (Trips, 2002:2).

(4) Old English:

...þæt he mehte his feorh generian.

that he could his property save

S O V

'... that he could save his property.'

(5) Early Middle English:

... ðat ic mihte hauen ðat eche lif.

that I might have that same life

S V O

With the structure of VO word order, then the subject should come before the verb (pre-verbal) and the object is after the verb (post-verbal). In other words, a subject and a verb (the predicate) are in regular order and coexist in extraphrasal construction. Inversion of the two will produce ungrammatical sentences in English.

(6) *They play football.*

(6a) **Play they football.*

(6b) **play football they.*

Based on the previous explanation, it can be concluded that the loss of some inflections in English causing English to pay attention to the word order in order to comprehend which element is the subject, the object, and so forth. According to word order, English verb is located after the subject and before the object or complement. The verb, then, fills the function of predicate. When the verb (lexical) does not exist in the construction, copula is needed so that the inflection can be attached.

The Characteristic of Indo-European Languages

The presence of copula in English can be traced back to the nature of the English language's ancestor. The ancestor of English is West-Saxon (Germanic), an Indo-European language and its proto-language is proto-Indo-European (PIE). Copula is assumed to have already existed in West-Saxon, the ancestor of English which is known as Old English. Those copulas are *ist*, *sind*, *eam* (The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology) and *beon* (Fischer et al, 2004:228).

Since German and English derived from the same ancestor, it is not a surprise if those two languages have copula as their linguistic unit and the copulas share identical behaviour. As explained by Pustet (2003:66), adjective and noun predicate in German needs copula. That behaviour also exists in English copula. Thus, it is not surprising to find copula in other non verbal predicative constructions in other Indo-European languages. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* mentions some ancient copulas that originated from PIE, such as **es*, and **bheu*.

In addition, the manifestation of the importance of copula still can be observed in present languages, for instance in German and Italy, two of Indo-European languages.

(7) *Mein name ist Peter Miller.*

'Nama saya Peter Miller'

(8) *Gianni è uno scienziato.*

'Gianno seorang ilmuwan'

ist (7) and *è* (8) are copula in German and Italy and they are "equal" to copula *is* in English. Thus, it is clear that copula is a shared linguistic unit in Indo-European languages and can be concluded as a part of Indo-European languages' characteristics.

CONCLUSION

Based on the previous analysis, it is quite clear that copula is morphosyntactic and syntactically prominent in English construction. Copula needs as an attachment element of inflection. Moreover, it serves as the relator to mediate subject and predicate relation. The emergence of copula in English can be described into three aspects. The three aspect discussed above includes grammaticalisation of lexical verb into functional verb, the change of word order in English language history, and the characteristics of Indo-European language.

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